

Home reading – vital to success

In the course of my work as an early years literacy consultant I often meet teachers who feel that their take-home reading program is not progressing as smoothly and efficiently as they would like.

Some of the difficulties expressed to me relate to the organisational structures for changing the take-home texts each day, guiding children and parents in their selection of "appropriate" texts, and the unintended message that reading is about "getting through" each text in a particular level.

The purpose of home reading is to further enhance the reading development of each child by allowing them to share positive reading experiences with parents, and should not be a practice that places undue strain on parents, children or their teachers.

The great advantage of levelled texts is that they assist teachers to more finely tune the reading instruction for each class member and match children with the most appropriate text to meet their current needs.

Careful teacher observation and use of running records assists in making decisions about matching texts to children. It is not intended that each child would need to work through all the books at a particular level before they could proceed to the next, nor must they work through books at every level.

A level 9 text containing unfamiliar content may be much more difficult for a child to read than a level 12 text with which the child has much prior knowledge. It is for this reason that broad bands of levelling are suggested for organising classroom reading materials. That is, grouping several levels together as a set. Some disadvantages with using levelled texts can occur when we narrow the choice made available to children by restricting them to only reading texts from their current instructional level when texts from an easier or harder range may be of more interest, or when

children perceive that they must "get through" the levels in order to keep up with their peers.

In a classroom that provides a balanced literacy program, levelled texts would form part but not all of the selection of texts available to children, and as Wille (1996) reminds us, "we need to be careful that it's the books we arrange into levels, not the children!"

Although parents have already engaged their children in many and varied literacy learning events prior to starting school, they are usually keen to see their children learning to read by way of classroom sets of texts as early as possible and are often eager to be involved in their child's reading development.

Schools vary in their focus for take-home reading; sometimes parents are asked to read with their child, sometimes to their child and at other times the text is to be read by the child. Home reading should be a positive and pleasurable experience, however tension can sometimes arise when parents are unsure as to what their role is, especially when the text is too difficult for the child to read independently.

It is important that teachers make clear to parents their aims for the home reading program and whether the text is required to be read with their child, to their child or by the child independently.

If the program is aimed at providing opportunities for all three then a home reading sheet such as the one suggested by Hornsby (2000) pictured below may be useful. In a home reading program where children are expected to read aloud independently, it is important that they take home a

text with which they have had some success, that is, a text they have already read in class, perhaps during guided or independent reading.

Rather than change children's take-home books every day, some teachers would prefer children to read the same book several times in order to develop fluent and automatic reading. Young readers are more able to attend to matters such as expression, intonation and deeper comprehension when they are given opportunities to repeat their reading of familiar texts. Some schools have overcome this situation by having children select, with teacher help, three or four texts to take home for the week with the focus being on reading these for fluency. Depending on the teacher and parents' expectations for the child, this may be supplemented with library books that do not need to be read independently. Again, clear communication with parents informing them of the teachers' aims and procedures for the home reading program is vital to success.

In providing clear communication with parents about children's reading development it is important that teachers know their learners and know how children learn to read. In some schools teachers use their running records to help parents see that their child is selecting texts at the "right" level and to discuss their aims for further reading development.

Partnerships between parents and teachers are more likely to be successful when based on shared understandings about classroom literacy practices and home literacy practices. Teachers have a role in clarifying their expectations for children's learning to parents and providing opportunities for parents to do the same. In so doing, all parties can celebrate the child's achievements together.

Fiona Callaghan
Literacy Consultant, CESA

Hornsby, D. (2000), "A Closer Look at Guided Reading", Eleanor Curtin Publishing, Armadale.
Hornsby, D. (2000), "A Closer Look at Guided Reading", Eleanor Curtin Publishing, Armadale.
Wille, C. (1996), "Matching books to children", Pen 107, Primary English Teaching Association, Marrickville.

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